

Community Revitalization: Building on the Heritage of Historic Savannah, Georgia
An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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May 2017

Date of Graduation

6 May 2017

SPC 11
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Abstract

Savannah, Georgia has an intriguing history of urban planning and city growth. As one of the original colonies, Savannah has a long history that has shaped it to be the city it is today. The most defining features of the city are the 22 squares sprinkled around downtown. There is a neighborhood south of downtown that has the lowest income rates in the city and is filled with dilapidated houses. This neighborhood is the Thomas Square Streetcar Historic District. Just south of this is the growing art district, the Starland District. There is research that greenspaces can improve neighborhoods and quality of life for communities and its residents. The goal of the project is to understand the history and context of these neighborhoods so new squares can be added. There is opportunity for connections between these Midtown neighborhoods and downtown. Seven new squares and four new community gardens would be added into the Thomas Square District in the hope of revitalizing it without pushing out residents. The idea is to create hopeful change that does not ruin the fabric of that community.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, Enrique Ramirez, for his time and support.

I could never thank my parents enough for their unlimited love, encouragement, and inspiration.

I would not have accomplished so much these past four years if not for their weekly phone calls
and 22 years of support.

I would also like to thank my friends who remind to eat lots of food, relax, and leave studio
every once in a while.

Process Analysis Statement

This project began with months of deliberation on topic choice. This project became a chance for me to create a project that was totally under my control and could be something I enjoy. I knew from the beginning I wanted to work with the city I live in, Savannah, Georgia. Over the course of this project I have gained more interest in my city. I have a deeper love and understanding of it. Eventually I decided to work with the iconic squares and spreading that prominence to a lesser developed neighborhood. After weeks of research and writing I became more and more interested and excited about this topic. It seemed that the neighborhood I chose was just asking for positive change. There were available connections to downtown and to the new art district. Every day I learned more about Savannah and its neighborhoods. The area I was working with has a majority of low income residents, so while designing I struggled with how to help revitalize it without making changes that would raise rent and property taxes. Gentrification happens when people are forced to move because they can no longer pay increased taxes or rent. Could there be a way that I could design anything without pushing these people out of their homes?

I wanted to create squares that were reminiscent of the downtown squares while taking context from this neighborhood and add to what the community was already trying to do. I wanted to make a small impact in the total economy of the city but still create a difference in the lives of the nearby residents. Although this includes research about the city experience and what Savannah has become, the creative aspect of the project became a chance for this neighborhood to grow. Through the challenges and interest I created a beautiful set of parks I think this community could feel proud of.

The board features the actual design of four new squares, graphic interpretations of the research, and images of past and present Savannah. The research paper is meant to be read alongside the images on the board. The images and figures are labeled on the board and noted in the paper for wayfinding. Even through the long nights of working and procrastination I really enjoyed this project and am truly proud of the work I have done. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Community Revitalization: Building on the Heritage of Historic Savannah, Georgia

As a resident of Savannah, Georgia for the last four years it is apparent why so many people love the city. Savannah is known for its gridded streets, colonial America city planning, 22 squares scattered around downtown, and a lively Riverwalk. Savannah is most recognizable by its urban plan. Sure, the one-way traffic through downtown can get a little tiring at rush hour, but the tree filled parks surrounded by 18th and 19th-century townhomes create the interesting historic city. People travel from all over the world to see the squares and relive the history. The closer you get to the Savannah River the more everything is alive and ready for tourists and locals alike. Once you go south of Forsyth Park, out of the Historic District, however, more and more of the quaint and vintage homes are suddenly unmanaged, derelict, or vacant.

In 1732 General James Oglethorpe arrived in Georgia, the last of the 13 original colonies of the future United States. The city of Savannah was born from the initial camp Oglethorpe set up along the present day Savannah River. (*Image #1*) A few months later in 1733, he created plans to make Savannah a great city truly separate from those of England (Sullivan). The plan became an innovative and detailed layout of a new city that continues to inspire urban planning today (Wilson 150). Not to be narcissistic he named it the Oglethorpe Plan. The original plan included only four squares, but later in the 18th and 19th century, 20 more were added and by 1857 there were 24 in total.

Oglethorpe's plans for the city were centered on the idea of repeated patterns of squares. He believed it to be "a vision of social equity and civic virtue" that could fix all societal woes by creating a garden oasis that would link city life and open space (Wilson 3, 135). Oglethorpe believed his plan would create a utopian city with the "repetitive nonhierarchical placement" of the squared neighborhoods (Reiter). The neighborhoods, or wards, were defined by eight lots

gridded around open squares. Each square is about 200 feet by 200 feet – roughly an acre of live oak trees, benches, and brick paths (Reiter). The squares are surrounded by a square one-way street which defines the adjacent eight lots. There were four lots to the north and south of the square which were tything lots and four lots to the east and west which were trust lots (Reiter). The tything lots were meant for residential mixed-use buildings with inns, restaurants, retail, and offices. The trust lots were meant for civic buildings including churches, government buildings, and schools (The Squares of Savannah). Even today the older government buildings and churches are always to the east and west sides of the squares. (*Image #3*)

The wards were positioned back to back – copying the eight-lot square over and over – to create individual areas of urban neighborhoods that fed into the city as a whole. The blocks of squares helped to create a more pedestrian friendly and human-scaled environment to control the size of development. The public greenspaces created an extension of the private space and offered an escape from the narrow residential lots. (Reiter). The public greenspaces became a place for gathering water, baking bread, celebrating holidays, feeding animals, and gathering area for emergencies, which make each square into a mini-neighborhood (Savannah Squares).

Over the years a few squares were lost to development, but more recently the city has made efforts to bring them back. In 1954, Ellis Square was destroyed to build a parking garage. Yet in 2005, the garage was leveled and the square was rebuilt in its original location to encourage historic preservation. Today the park is one of the largest and most modern squares in the city, complete with shaded seating and an interactive fountain. (*Image #9*)

Each square recognizes an important person or historical event that helped shape Savannah. Most of the squares have statues or fountains dedicated to historical figures associated with the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the growth of Savannah. There is speculation

that human remains are buried in some of the squares including, Casimir Pulaski and Tomochichi – a Native American who befriended Oglethorpe, but no one has been able to verify if the remains belong to these figures. A few of the squares feature a little more history in themselves. Franklin Square once held the city's water supply in the 19th century, Crawford Square was the only square African-Americans were allowed to walk through during the Jim Crow period, and Whitefield Square was a burial ground for slaves (Savannah's Squares).

From early colonial days to 21st century Savannah, the squares have always been an "urban forest" surrounded by the businesses and historic houses that make up the city (Reiter). Understanding the historical value of the area, much of Oglethorpe's plan was translated into the Landmark Historic District in 1966. The Savannah College of Art and Design, founded in 1978, soon began to buy and renovate over 50 old buildings throughout the Historic District. The addition of the college created a spark in the importance of historic preservation. This growth of restoration and preservation in the Historic District has ensured that the energetic downtown would remain an epicenter for business, government, and cultural growth (Wilson 135). It has created a unique and memorable city plan. The street grid was continued beyond Oglethorpe's original plan as the city grew, and has left a lasting mark on its growth. Every year millions of tourists visit Savannah to experience the historic nature of the Oglethorpe plan. The squares and preserved historic district of downtown make tourism one of Savannah's largest economic engines (Economic Development). *(Image #4)*

There is an area of northern Midtown, just south of Forsyth Park, which is comprised of portions of the Victorian Historic District and the Thomas Square Streetcar District. *(Figure #1)* The Thomas Square neighborhood was "built on diversity" and encompasses mixed incomes, mixed races, and mixed zoning uses (Thomas Square). When northern Midtown was developed

in the 1800s it became Savannah's first "suburb," (Thomas Square). The pre-Civil war neighborhood was largely farmland, but with the city borders growing the farm land moved farther away to make room for new homes. In 1890, Savannah was witnessing an unprecedented period of growth. After the Civil War, the area was developed, houses were built, and it became *the* place to live. There were opportunities for business growth within the neighborhood and it was close enough to the downtown area while remaining as an escape from the city; the main idea of a suburb. As Savannah continued to grow, more suburbs were planned and people moved farther from the city center, and out of Midtown. There were many people who could not afford to move and the majority of these people were minorities (Thomas Square). This occurred during the 1950s when the white-flight movement was sweeping the country (Gregor). As more and more people moved away, the residents that were left did not have the resources to maintain the neighborhood as it deteriorated. Those who could afford to live somewhere else did. The only reason people moved to the area was because it was cheap. As more houses stood vacant or unmaintained, crime increased and city funding to the area slowed. If there were no property taxes coming from the neighborhood, there was even less money for funding. Today it is an area rich with economic, political, and architectural history but one that still houses people with some of the lowest incomes in the city. "Owner occupancy rates in Thomas Square are among the lowest in Savannah, and the number of vacant buildings is among the highest," (Thomas Square). The area between Forsyth Park and Victory Drive includes countless vacant and derelict homes. Residents just do not have the money or resources to maintain their homes or create a neighborhood they can be proud of. Although pockets of the neighborhood still have maintained "tree-lined streets, brick roads, and large Victorian homes," the majority of the neighborhood is deteriorating. The vacant homes and silent streets beckon crime (Thomas Square). In fact, the

same factors that had made Thomas Square so profitable and attractive were now destroying it. The growth of the suburbs made the area unwanted. The migration away from the city center was creating great neighborhoods only waiting for their turn at their demise.

Cities are always changing; that is a part of urban growth. Being aware of how a city is changing and how that impacts the city can help create better communities (Newitz). There is a concern when neighborhoods change too quickly or too much that prices increase. This results in gentrification – a term detrimental in urban design. Everyone seems to be aware of it, or the idea of it. The problem lies in how that knowledge is employed. Gentrification happens when changes in neighborhoods force long-time residents to move out because of increased rent, increased land prices, and increased property taxes. It is most visible when these changes occur drastically and do not give the old neighborhood the time or the resources to adapt. Increases in prices seemingly happen “overnight” without regard for the composition of the neighborhood (Angotti). Gentrification can be best explained by the adage “your neighborhood becomes someone else’s neighborhood,” (Jacobus). The goal of designers should be to help residents create better versions of their neighborhoods without forcing them out.

When the new residents that move into the neighborhood have money, neighborhoods can quickly become revitalized in a way that previous residents did not have the resources to accomplish; which can be good for the economics of a neighborhood. Unfortunately, when new residents do not know or care about the neighborhood’s culture or history the new development can change the fabric and culture of the community. The neighborhood starts to become “hip, marketable, and chic,” (Angotti). This continues to drive up the prices of the neighborhood and drives people out of the homes they have lived in for decades but can suddenly no longer afford.

There is not much lower income people can do as cities see the benefits for the economy of growing a neighborhoods' marketability.

It is generally agreed upon that gentrification hurts low-income residents and the culture of a neighborhood. The question becomes where to draw the line. Do you allow development to occur to improve the neighborhoods' safety and economic growth while inevitably forcing people out of the neighborhoods? Or do you leave distressed communities alone to deteriorate further? If they are left alone then at least people will not be forced to move out. It seems wrong not to help communities economically by creating new development, but it also seems wrong to push too much change on residents that they cannot afford (Jacobus). Although, there is a possibility for increases in taxes and rent with any positive change to a neighborhood, residents still want better communities. Everyone wants to live in a safe, attractive neighborhood. It is when changes occur just to be "hip and trendy" that it becomes an issue. There are some ways change can occur in a neighborhood without dismantling its entire foundation.

Over the past few decades, a new district has been growing to form the arts district Savannah has been missing. In 2000, two Savannah College of Art and Design students bought a few vacant buildings in the area around the old Starland Dairy and the revitalization of Starland began. Early on in its development, local artists began to paint murals on the walls of the abandoned dairy and surrounding buildings (Savannah's Starland District). Today it is known to locals as the Starland District and has become a prime location for art studios and galleries, offices, and restaurants (Gregor). While the Starland District is not a city defined neighborhood, but rather a grouping of development created by locals, it is accepted that the district is centered on Bull Street. Shopping, art walks, and concerts are fairly contained within Victory Drive and 37th Street, and Barnard and Drayton Streets. The area was once dominated by the old Starland

Dairy which opened in 1909. The area surrounding the dairy was a great location for residential and commercial growth. In the early 1900s, the dairy was the lifeblood of the neighborhood, but with the movement of people towards the new suburbia the business collapsed and the community went with it. Without the dairy for work more people left and without the people, the neighborhood collapsed. The Starland Dairy went from the anchor for a thriving community to a “vacant and deteriorating centerpiece” for another failing inner city neighborhood (Savannah’s Starland District).

With the help of locals and outsiders the Starland District is coming back swinging. With its history and location it makes sense for this neighborhood to become that business hub once again. It is becoming *the* new place to have dinner, shop, and hang out. While Broughton Street is catering to tourists, Starland is starting to create an eclectic side of Savannah meant for locals. Starland is a secret spot for a truly creative community. As the neglected buildings become studio spaces, small offices, and restaurants, the area is growing in economic and cultural value (Gregor).

However, there is a concern that the Starland area is becoming an example of dreaded gentrification. New shops and restaurants are opening up and leading to an increase in rent and property prices. The growth is happening quickly because the rent space is still fairly cheap. Starland is not trying to create a new culture or dismiss the history that surrounds the area as many of the new businesses are still focused on the fabric of that community. Although newcomers tend to be younger and whiter than most of the neighborhood there seems to be a real interest in the quirkiness that already encompasses the area (Dawers). Starland has not had quite enough time to mature to a point where gentrification is largely visible. Although the growth is fairly new, the issues may arise when Starland becomes too attractive and starts to drive up

prices, no matter how much people appreciate the community that is there. Events in the district today, including art walks and live music, seem to be focused on the community and the art, and being able to bring those two together (Dawers). Even as the Starland District becomes a place of “art, music, and creative freedom,” (Kingsberry) holding onto that history while understanding and embracing the community may not prevent the root issues of gentrification.

Change can be brought to neighborhoods in smaller doses though. Building luxury apartments and boutique hotels drives up prices. Designers need to be aware of the kinds of things that drastically change a neighborhood as well as the cultural contexts that are already present. Adding small scale greenspaces can have just as much of an impact on a neighborhood and not every project needs to change the world (Jaffe). Smaller projects that are centered on community input and involvement can create incremental change that do not transform a community “overnight,” (Jacobus). This could help neighborhoods maintain their “personality” and cultural framework without changing the economic fabric. The goal with this project is to make smaller changes to the neighborhood. These parks allow for a forgotten piece of land to make a big difference in a neighborhood, (Creating Mini-Parks) while still creating “centers of interest and activity” (Seymour 2).

The purpose of this thesis is to take inspiration from Savannah and its squares to propose a plan for a new set of parks to be added to the northern Midtown area of Savannah. There are seven parks and four community gardens being proposed to the area between Victory Drive and Forsyth Park. (*Figure #3*) These greenspaces, inspired by the squares downtown, will serve as added fresh open space to an underdeveloped community, a connection to downtown and the Starland District and provide an economic boost for the struggling neighborhoods.

There is opportunity in Savannah that is just waiting for the connection. The borders of these surrounding neighborhoods, although defined for data, do not seem to have finite boundaries. In fact, there is even an opportunity for the boundaries of downtown to expand. Broughton Street to River Street is established as the main slice of downtown because of the shopping, restaurants, and lively nightlife. The undefined nature of Savannah's downtown is partly because the residential and retail areas are not strictly separated. Broughton to River Street is largely a commercial retail area. South of Broughton there is an apparent residential feel but the presence of the squares, Forsyth Park, the historic architecture, and surrounding small scale retail blur the line between public and private. Sometimes you forget that people actually still live in the 19th-century townhomes. Although the northern boundary is fixed because of the river and the Georgia-South Carolina border beyond, the southern boundary is more unsolidified. There is still silent debate about where the south boundary lies. Most people agree that the west boundary is Martin Luther King Boulevard and the east is Broad Street. Some say the south boundary of downtown stops as soon as Liberty Street, or after Forsyth Park, or even as far as Victory Drive because of the architectural styles and recent growth. With this loose interpretation of where downtown ends comes the potential to stretch accessible tourist activities and development further than Forsyth Park.

The current squares sit along four main roads; Barnard Street, Bull Street, Abercorn Street, and Habersham Street. The additional parks are also planned to be located along these streets as well to continue this gridded pattern. This will also give a physical connection from downtown to the Starland District. There is a disconnection between the activities in Forsyth Park and those in Starland. In the 1800s when the streetcar was added to the streets, the city created Thomas Square – a park at the end of the streetcar path. This square, along with the

streetcar, created a "focal point for that part of town" with downtown (Wilson 157). With continued squares there can begin to be a growth in connectivity as well. With the placement of new squares, there is an opportunity to connect with the Friday Art Walk nights, the Forsyth Park Saturday Farmers' Markets, and the growth of Starland as a whole.

Greenspace is an important part of a functioning city. Numerous studies have shown that lower income neighborhoods have less greenspace than higher income neighborhoods. The northern Midtown area is no exception. The neighborhoods between Victory Drive and Forsyth Park have, on average, lower income residents and conversely less greenspace. (*Figure #2*) Live oak trees stretch over many of the roads, but there is not much grass area, parks, or playgrounds between Forsyth Park and Victory Drive. Most parts of Savannah have no issue with a lack of greenspace. Downtown there is a one-acre, tree filled square every other block. In the Thomas Square District, there is less planned greenery. The ability for people to interact with nature is intrinsic in the growth and health of a community, but urban areas often separate people from the natural environment (Fuller 135). Greenspace is a regular part of downtown Savannah and now it is time for greenspace frequency to migrate south into this neighborhood.

Most people today spend a majority of their time inside (Fuller 135). Research suggests greenspaces are vital to the health and livelihood of people and their neighborhoods. Cities prompt stress with "noise, congestion, and fear of crime," (Barton 202). Parks and gardens can alleviate some of this stress with opportunities for recreation, relaxation, and a break from hectic urban life. Added greenspaces can also increase community pride and create a more social neighborhood as it creates places for social networking and community bonding (Barton 203). There is also research which suggests that suggests exposure to nature increases job satisfaction and productivity. Greenspaces can provide an area for rest and escape (Relf) as the original

squares downtown were intended to be an escape into the urban forest (Reiter). In addition to mental health, having a place for recreation can improve physical health as well (Barton 221). Planned parks can give children places to play, clean open space can be area for running, and gardening can even be physical.

One of Savannah's biggest issues is storm water. When large rainstorms move through many streets flood because the aging infrastructure cannot handle it. Instead of an entire infrastructure overhaul, proper landscaping and the addition of bioswales could help reduce the strain on the sewer system by controlling street flooding and surface water runoff from non-porous surfaces. Bioswales are elements in a landscape designed to remove pollution from rainwater and reduce the stress on city infrastructure. They are gently sloped ditches filled with sediments and vegetation. It acts as natural storm water drainage. The rainwater can sit in the bioswale instead of in the street. While reducing road flooding risks the water can naturally be filtered through the plants and sediments. Most of the water can actually be absorbed into the ground. Excess water can still connect to existing systems and rejoin water collections. In this application it would be most beneficial to help clean the storm water before it goes either into the Savannah River or the Ogeechee River. The surrounding marshland and rivers are an important ecosystem for the area. Pollutants from storm water runoff are polluting these systems. The bioswales would also help reduce the flooding seen in this area. (*Figure #4*)

The community gardens are not strictly located on the four main streets, but seek to serve nearby residents. The community gardens would not be focused on the tourists, but would aim to strengthen the community. The community gardens would provide more impact to these neighborhoods and create a bridge between the neighborhoods north of Forsyth Park and those around Victory Drive. Community gardens also have a multitude of other benefits for the

community. The main reason for community gardens is the availability of fresh, healthy produce. Community gardens can provide food for those who either cannot afford it or do not have the means to travel to a grocery store. Community gardens can alleviate the stress of finding healthy food while developing healthy individuals by increasing the availability of healthy foods and providing food education. Community gardens also allow residents who do not have the land the opportunity to garden. This in turn also has physical health benefits, including physical exercise, improved coordination, and better injury recovery (Relf). There is also an opportunity to connect with the farmers' market in Forsyth Park. Extra food grown in the gardens could also be sold to raise money to maintain the gardens.

This project is first about helping these immediate neighborhoods, while understanding and referencing the impact of surrounding factors. The ideas for the new parks are inspired by the history, presence, and popularity of the squares. It would not be just adding a few more greenspaces but also connecting to the positive change that is already happening. These small changes to this neighborhood may not have a dramatic change to the city as a whole but could improve the daily lives of the residents of the area and potentially boost revitalization.

The design aspect of the project focused on the development of four of the seven lots. These four empty lots have become Starland Square, Eckburg Square, Live Oak Square, and Victory Music Square. There were similar ideas used throughout the designs of the four squares to create continuity between the parks that lie blocks away from each other. Each new square has a central landmark piece, similar to the historic downtown squares' statues and fountains. The brick sidewalks also mimic the historic walkways. There are a few brick sidewalks that remain in this part of the city, but most of downtown is still brick. There is also a congruity with seating. The use of curved, minimalistic concrete and wooden benches are seen in each new square.

Every new square will also feature bioswales along the roads. A general beautification would also occur, including clean-up of overgrown vegetation, new landscaping, lighting, and new curbs.

Starland Square is a sculpture park because of its proximity to the growing Starland District. The new design centers around a large sculpture with pathways and seating. The idea would be that local artists would create these sculptures. The Starland Dairy used to be the lifeblood of the community. There is hope that the new Starland District will become the new heart and this square could add to that growth. The lot is currently overgrown with trees and shrubs. Eckburg Square, named for the nearby Savannah College of Architecture and Design Eckburg Hall, is a playground for recreation and play for children. The equipment was inspired by the trees that fill Savannah and allow for ample opportunity for climbing. Play became the showcase piece as the playground grew. Live Oak Square is named for the nearby Live Oak neighborhood and the large live oaks that dot the city. The square features an interactive water fountain that serves as an escape from the hot asphalt streets of the humid city. An escape from the Savannah summer is welcome by people of all ages. The water paths were inspired by the oak trees that stretch over the city streets. Victory Music Square started as an idea created by the community. It is currently named by nearby locals the Victory Music Park, but it remains an empty lot except for semi-mowed grass and a sign. Every month, during the art walks, small concerts are held here. The communities use in this lot gave inspiration for a more permanent design. There is a slightly elevated stage in the middle surrounded by benches radiating outward. During performance there is room on the grass and benches for seating, but it can also be a good place for children to play or relax when there are not performances. The new squares begin to connect the areas, especially as the Victory Music and Starland Squares added to the growth of

the Starland District. This is just a beginning. There are opportunities for improvement. There is a clear opportunity for growth in the area by creating a bridge between two areas. If this project was brought to fruition, there would be community involvement to understand what they want to see. Residents of a community will know their neighborhood better than a designer could.

The goal is not to change the entire future of this community, but begin to make a small positive change for these neighborhoods. It centers on being aware of what is happening in the area; including its past, present, and the potential for its future.

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Image #6

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Image #7

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Image #8

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